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ABSTRACT

Discussion begins with an exploration of the relationship between play and culture and concludes with recommendations for teachers of children in multicultural classrooms. Intermediate sections discuss cultural awareness and the role of the teacher in promoting cultural understanding among children. Included in the discussion are remarks about numerous functions of play, a list of five facts considered important in dealing with cultures and American social classes, and a list of skills and characteristics that are necessary and desired attributes and abilities of teachers assigned to multicultural classrooms. Teachers are advised to remember that most Americans are not middle class, most lower class Americans are white, most welfare recipients are white, working class and middle class are not synonymous, and every cultural group has its own social hierarchy of classes. It is specifically recommended that teachers (1) provide many opportunities for dramatic play; (2) use manipulatives from the child's environment; (3) use literature that reflects many cultural backgrounds; (4) encourage language in informal settings; (5) celebrate many multicultural customs and games; (6) provide daily routines and activities for the entire group; (7) invite parents into the classroom as resources and models; and (8) address the special needs of the interracial child. (RH)

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PLAY AND CULTURE: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

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Play and Culture: Implications for Teachers

> Play is universal, knowing no national or cultural boundaries, peculiar to all ages and all races, subject to description yet defying definition; essential to the development of thought and language, yet neither; central to the transmission of culture, yet transcending culture.
>
> Frost and Sunderlin
> *When Children Play*

> The great gift that members of the human race have for each other is not exotic experiences but an opportunity to achieve awareness of the structure of their *own* system, which can be accomplished only by interacting with others who do not share that system.
>
> Edward Hall
> *Beyond Culture*

Children arrive in our classrooms from a variety of different backgrounds, cultures, and heritages. Each child is a unique individual that somehow must cope, despite his background, with the new and often culturally different environment of the classroom. What methods can a teacher employ to best meet the learning needs of the various cultural backgrounds of *all* the children? How can teachers help culturally different children learn about themselves and others? How can teachers and the other children learn about cultures different than their own? The best answer to these questions may be in the almost instinctive, natural occuring phenomenon of children's play.

Perhaps, however, due to the academic constraints and diffident attutudes towards play in classrooms, the value and natural role of play in the transmission and perpetuation of cultural identity, the development of cultural awareness, and the intellectual development of young children has been neglected.

The Relationship of Play and Culture

Consider first what is play and what is culture. Finding acceptable, mutually agreed upon definitions of either is a difficult task for both are complex entities. Initially many think culture is only the outwards products of a given culture; when culture is actually much more than a group's art, music, and movement (Lubeck,1985). One way to define culture is to say it consists of standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it (Goodenough,1963). Or perhaps the following idea sums culture more aptly: "Culture is almost everything. It is emotions and works of art: it is behavior, beliefs, and institutions, it includes what people know, feel, think, make and do (Spradley,1972, p. 6-7)."

Culture is learned through enculturation. Enculturation is a two-fold process and refers to the means by which an individual becomes a part of the group and also the means by which the group is reproduced and perpetuated. It includes the acquisition of skills, habits, values and attitudes of the given culture. In complex societies 'enculturation' is frequently blurred with the concept of 'socialization', and it is not uncommon for experts to assume that a minority child needs to be 'bicultural', enculturated to the group of origin and 'socialized' to the dominant society (Lubeck,1985). There is not, however, one *normative* culture or process of growth and learning based on the dominant society which all peoples must follow. Rather different cultural groups have developed different adaptive strategies, different systems of order and logic, and different modes of

enculturation that informs the practices of people who have lived under similar distinctive environmental and cultural conditions (Lubeck, 1985).

Play serves an important role in the process of enculturation. Play is an expression and celebration of one's culture. Through play children learn about their culture as well as practice adaptive and functional stategies for survival in the culture. Play actually reproduces the society and culture of the child. "Children's play is full of the content of their lives" (Sutton-Smith and Sutton-Smith, 1974, p. 246). The relationship of culture with play is simply that we can be who we are through play (Hale- Benson,1986). Hopi Indian children play by conducting pretend rabbit hunts and at modeling pottery (Garvey, 1977). Eskimo children play turn-taking skill games without competion that reflect the later skills necessary for floating on ice floes with a polar bear. Aborigine children play games that imitate tracking and hunting. In monarchical ruled societies children play games in which one person tries to be king over all the others. American children play games that are based on individualism and competition (Sutton-Smith and Sutton-Smith, 1974).

Cultural play ultimately enhances the child's self confidence and optimism about their usual lives within the context of their everyday cultural world. Because the play of children is not product oriented but rather fulfills the needs of the ego to establish mastery over self in a social, cultural world; play establishes emotional autonomy. Through the emotional autonomy children gain identity and cultural transmission. Therefore as a child plays and reproduces the main themes of personal and cultural life, this leads to a regeneration of cultural purposes, or a revival of cultural confidence (Erikson,1963).

Play also serves a therapeutic function or role in the transmission of culture. "Plainly, play with other children does have an important therapeutic role or, in any case, an important role in helping children to take their place more easily in the stressful social activities of later life (Erikson,

1983, p. 62)." Children who do not have ample opportunities to play cultural themes of their real life may have later social deficits (Smilansky, 1968). Similarly, research studies of monkeys raised in isolation who were given just twenty minutes of daily play with other monkeys retain their ability to interact with other animals and do not show decrements in intelligence as compared to monkeys raised in total isolation. The social values of play cannot be underestimated.

Children learn and practice the rhythm of their culture during complex, sophisticated dramatic play sequences. Individuals are dominated in their behavior by complex hierarchies of interlocking rhythms (Hall, 1984). As children play by slipping in and out of various roles, trying out different rhythms, and finding the match that ignites a relationship in play, children are perfecting the rhythm of their culture. "Each culture, of course, was choreographed in its own way, with its own beat, tempo, and rhythm" (Hall, 1984, p. 155). For example, the timing and turn taking of conversation is essential. In play, if one child dominates the conversation or dialog the play sequence ends.

Play also allows children to practice and repeat sequences which are necessary for learning the rhythm of culture. Children play over and over the same episode or theme as they integrate the social and cultural meaning of it into their system. Interestingly, in our adult culture we are trained not to appreciate repetition. We typically "view" a single performance of literally everything including TV programs, performances, and outings. Perhaps due to the lack of adult repetition, the discovery of rhythm for adults is difficult (Hall, 1984). Since the underlying principle of rhythm is repetition, children can naturally discover the rhythm of culture in symbolic play.

Finally, the hypothesis proposed by the great Dutch historian Huizinga is that human culture actually emerged out of man's capacity to play and to adopt the ludic attutude (Bruner, 1983). This notion is supported by current studies of play that point out the increased ability of divergent thinking skills, the increase of self esteem, the increased display of freedom and

inventiveness in children who are player compared to those who are not (Fein, 1983). "Players" don't worry about looking "bad" in front of others rather they initiate, try different idea, and are happier (Erikson, 1983).

From an educational perspective there is a link between culture and learning which can be observed through play. A child's play is believed to reflect the degree to which the child can impose his own sense of structure and sequence (culturally based) on the external environment. Play in turn relects not only the development of perceptual and cognitive structures but also the extent to which they have been integrated and can be applied to new situations. Therefore, play can be viewed as an index to the level of the preschool child's overall cognitive competence (Hale-Benson,1986). Due to the relationship of play and culture, however, the child's cognitive competence and learning style will reflect the child's culture as well. A pointed example of different learning styles and cognitive competence is demonstrated in this anecdote: "Remember that it might be the White kid who knows his address and phone number, and the Black kid who can actually find his way home," said Dr. David Smith, Center for Urban Ethnography, University of Pennsylvania (Lubeck, 1985).

Interestingly the study of child-rearing is culturally an examination of what 'goes in.' The study of play behavior is the study of what 'comes out' (Hale-Benson, 1986). For example, white child rearing practices tend to be 'object-oriented'. Children in play are typically provided with a great number of toys and manipulable materials and encouraged to discover properties and relationships. Consequently, the play of white children tends to be more solitary and demonstrates a more expressive use of materials. Black children, in constrast, tend to grow up within large family networks with a great deal of human interaction, objects are considered less important, and child rearing practices are more "people-oriented' (Lubeck,1985). The play of Black children uses less objects, involves more people, and incorporates more interpersonal themes.

Cultural awareness.

Not all children from the same ethnic group are the same. Ethnic groups cannot be stereotyped (West,1986). Not all Black children sing beautifully, dance rhythmically, or talk in Black dialect. While it is frequently stated that Black children (particularly males) are very active in their home environments and consequently appear hyperactive in the schools (Hale-Benson,1986), this is not true of all Black children.

To first know your own culture is most helpful in understanding different cultures. American society is based upon individualism and competition. We glorify individualism and we glorify cooperation. This a definite value conflict. Children do not know when we want which (West,1986). A child from a truly communal subculture may have only experiencd group ownership, so taking crayons or pencils from another is not considered stealing. A child from extreme poverty may share everything including what little food exists. This child cannot perceive taking another's lunch as stealing. Their play will reflect these cultural differences.

Interestingly, it is the structure of play that also instructs children, however subtlely, in the values of their culture (Bruner, 1983). For example competition and competitiveness are instructed to American children through play. Our children are taught to win at all costs in many cases. This is not true in other countries. In Tengu in New Guinea children play games in which neither side 'win'. The game terminates only when the two sides have achieved equality. "There is no question that the games of childhood reflect some of the ideals that exist in the adult society and that play is a kind of socialization in preparation for taking your place in that adult society (Bruner, 1983, p. 62)."

Children come from different locals and thus treat space and time differently. Hall (1984) considers time and culture synonomous. To know the timing of a given culture is to know the nonverbal language of that culture. In our technological society, precise timing is vital. "But

middle class members are fanatics about promptness on everything--and we have ulcers to prove it (West, 1986)." Timing and promptness are not as important to a child who comes from poverty where there is no reason to "hurry-up" and be hungry. Timing in children's play will also reflect their culture.

Above all, teachers' awareness and attitudes about culturally different children must be considered. Researchers have found social class to be the strongest variable in determining teachers' attitudes toward students. In general, many myths exist about social class and should be considered as they relate to attitudes about culture. To begin with there is really no middle class. Actually there are six classes: Upper upper, lower upper, upper middle, lower middle, upper lower, and lower lower. The working class is actually the upper lower class. Interestingly, most teachers, because they have strived hard through education to do better than their parents, come from this class. In addition every ethnic group, despite financial class, has its own stratificaiton based on heritage and homeland traditions.

Five important facts to remember when dealing with cultures and American social classes are: 1) Most Americans are not middle class. 2) Most lower class Americans are white. 3) Most welfare recipients are white. 4) Working class and middle class are not synonomous. 5) Every cultural group a its own social hierarchy of classes (West,1986).

The role of the teacher

Children from different language and cultural backgrounds may fail in school for various reasons. Changes are needed in educational practices to ensure success for these children and to bring about understanding of different cultures for all children (Saracho,1983). Educational change can come from an understanding and an awareness of the various cultures, from having special skills necessary for the multilingual/multicultural classroom, and from understanding the role of play as it relates to culture and learning.

Since the quality of a multilingual/multicultural program depends initially on teachers' attitudes, teachers must become aware of their own competence in teaching children from different cultural backgrounds. They must investigate their relationship with the larger society, and their knowledge of and attitudes toward people who are different from them (Saracho,1983). "Teachers must be free from cultural ethnocentrism, accepting diverse cultures as valuable" (Saracho, 1983, p. 101).

The first step in this process to know and understand different cultures is for the teacher to first understand his own culture. As Hall expressed in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, when given the opportunity to interact with others who do not share the same systems of belief, one is able to become aware of ones own system and beliefs. "If we want to be successful at teaching selected values unlike the cultural values children are used to, our best strategy is to understand where the children are coming from: why they have such different values, habits or attitudes . . . and why we have the ones we have (West,1986)."

The second step is to examine classroom teaching skills. The skills and characteristics that are necessary to teach in the multicultural classroom are varied. The general characteristics usually associated with effective teaching are rich, extensive perceptions of the field and learning objectives; accurate interpersonal and intrapersonal perceptions; loving, sensitive, pleasant and open-ended personalities; ability to select adequate curriculum materials; and enjoying work with children and parents. In addition to those characteristic, the teacher in multicultural classrooms should:

1. Know enough of the child's language to carry on a simple conversation.
2. Know and understand the bilingual/bicultural child's culture and, preferable, have experienced cultural immersion.
3. Understand the development of the child's self-concept.
4. Know how to plan effectively, considering individual differences including language and cultural features.
5. Have a commitment and dedication to bilingual/bicultural children, guiding them to achieve their maximum potential (Saracho,1983).

Finally, knowlege about the benefits and correlates of play in cultural transmission and learning is essential. Play is an integral part of the development of the child. Through play children learn physical and logico-mathematical knowledge as well as important social knowledge. Symbolic or dramatic, pretend play is of special value to the development of the child for another reason. Dramatic play is "a major avenue for integrating cultural and social mores of the adult world" (Frost and Klein, 1979, p. 14).

Specific activities for the classroom.

1. Provide many opportunities for dramatic play.

Children need daily opportunities to engage in dramatic play. Dramatic play in the multicultural classroom will serve two primary tasks. First it will allow the multicultural child to join in an activity using nonverbal response when English is his second language. All cultures 'mother' babydolls and cook dinners even if techniques and customs are different. The use of props and objects in the dramatic play center that are familiar to the child will encourage the child to join in dramatic play more quickly. Props such as a wok, bamboo steamer, saris, komonos, authentic games and toys, etc. (for an Oriental child) replicate items found in the child's home environment.

Secondly, dramatic play promotes peer acceptance more quickly. As the muticultural child engages in play on a common ground, peers are more likely to accept the child's unique contributions. Playing and interacting as equals, not just contact with other cultures, is an important aspect for understanding cultures. If ethnically different children who frequently are in the lowest reading group and are always grouped together for other activities, the teacher may in fact be reinforcing stereotypes that children have learned from television and the larger society (West,1986). If provided frequent informal play times, children can interact more readily with

others of all ethnic backgrounds.

Some children in the multicultural classroom may need help in developing skills required during dramatic play. Initially the teacher can provide support by participating in the action, using props and toys to stimulate cooperative play, and by showing the child how the play can be varied and extended.

2. Use manipulatives from the child's environment.

Children construct knowledge and learn when given the opportunity to manipulate, explore and investigate their real world. Teachers capitalize on the vested interest of students when they provide objects from the child's real world. For the Hispanic child, it makes sense to count pinto beans or to cut halves from tortillas. "When teachers use household objects from a specific child's background to teach number concepts, not only is the teacher helping to develop cognitive skills but also telling the children that objects from their culture are useful and are valued by adults and children from different backgrounds (Vold,1985, p.5)."

The process of 'provisioning for learning' offers many opportunities to build relections of the community into the learning environment. When a teacher uses the community as a source of non-catalog learning materials, the learning environment begins to resemble the community (Loughlin and Suina, 1983). "These materials offer familiarity and positive associations with children's lives outside the school, and so can help children feel comfortable (Loughlin and Suina, 1983, p. 5)" in the environment of school.

3. Use literature that reflects many cultural backgrounds.

Reading aloud to children is crutial during the early years. This may be especially so for the child who comes from a home where books are scarce or nonexistant. The difference between children who read early and those who do not is found not in the children themselves or the different cultures, but rather in the parents. Children who experience early reading success had

parents who read regularly to them as young children (Butler and Clay, 1982). Teachers need to incorporate frequent and repetitious multicultural readings into the *daily* routine.

The use of multicultural literature for daily reading is beneficial for other reasons, as well . Through multicultural literature, children discover that all cultural groups have made significant contributions. In addition to providing cultural information, multicultural literature stimulates children's language and cognitive development. A well- balanced multicultural literature program includes literature that depicts people with a variety of aspirations, from different socioeconomic levels, with different occupations and with a range of human characteristics (Norton, 1985).

4. Encourage language in informal settings.

Language development is naturally enhanced through informal play situations. So frequently a teacher will complain that the bilingual child "has no language skills" but if one listens on the playground it is clear that the child has language and can communicate quite well.

Bilingual peers serve as important language models (Dixon and Fraser,1986). "Sometimes children can be head using English during pleasant, unstressful activities such as singing or dramatic play, but will continue to find it difficult to answer questions or initiate conversation" (Dixon and Fraser,1986, p. 274). Teachers must guard against giving the impression that English is used only for instruction or for impersonal information. Encouraging children to share their emotions; e.g., during play or an art activity; can help them to overcome diffidence and begin to include more informal English words in their vacabulary (Dixon and Fraser,1986).

5. Celebrate many multicultural customs and games.

Holidays are celebrated in different ways in various cultures. Teachers should include many of these different customs and games in their classroom. For example, Christmas is celebrated many ways around the world: In England the tradition of the yule log is observed; in the Netherlands Saint Nicholas fills the wooden shoes with gifts; in Mexico children take turns trying

to break the candy-filled pinata by striking it with a stick; in the Philippines children wear wreaths and chains made of tropical flower.

In becoming aware of differences, remember that some cultures may not celebrate American holidays at all and likewise have their own holidays that can be celebrated in the classroom. Chanukah, Chinese New Year, Juneteenth, and Cinco De Mayo are just a few of the many possibilities. "In addition to understanding cultural differences, the teacher should stress similarities among children in the class while presenting differences in respectful manner that enriches the knowledge and understanding of both groups (West,1983, p.88-89)."

6. **Provide daily routines and activities for the entire group.**

Routines, circle time, , and using organized games such as follow the leader and charades allow the multicultural child to familiarize himself quickly and to join in. Songs, stories, and fingergames with motions or repeating refrains or actions invite participation for the same reason. Activities with a common goal such as shopping, cooking, feeding classrooom pets, gardening, etc. allows the child to be part of the activity without having to take full responsibility for the outcome.

7. **Invite parents into the classroom as resources and models**.

Parents serve as important 'educators' of their children in cultural functions (Swick, 1986). From birth parents have been teaching their children habits, skills, beliefs, values, and customs based on the culture they know. It would be wasteful not to tap into the greatest cultural resource available; i.e., the parents of the children.

Parents can share in the classroom the games, foods, customs, traditions, and speech that are native to their culture. It is exciting for the the whole class to be visited by a person from a different culture dressed in the native clothing. It is especially rewarding and ego boosting for the child to have his parent be that someone special.

8. **Special needs of the interracial child.**

The the number of interracial children are rising due to an increase in interracial marriages (1983 census) and a freer attitude towards interracial sexual relationships. This creates a new challenge for early childhood educators (Wardle, 1987).

Since identity development is a critical element of overall early development the interracial child needs special sensitivity on the part of the teacher. Reseach on race and culture identity shows that families teach children one of three beliefs: 1) that color is irrelevant and the child is human above all, 2) that the culture of the parent of color (e.g., Black) is dominant, or 3) that both cultures are equally important. Contemporary families are more likely to teach the third option emphasizing the dual cultural heritage of their children (Wardle, 1987).

Teachers of interracial children must not go along with society's attempt to classify by the parent of color, but must teach the children they are culturally members of both races. Access to the respective races'

cultural customs and practices should be provided in the classroom. Therefore, parents of interracial children serve as very important role models. Since birth the child has been exposed to both cultures' styles, speech patterns, manerisms, and cultural norms. Support must also be given for the parents' struggle to develop a strong family unit so that a positive interracial identification can take place (Wardle,1987).

<u>Conculsion</u>

Young children learn many things through play. Culture is one important thing that is learned through play. Culture is relected through play. It would be impossible to eliminate culture in play. By utilizing the natural phenomenon of play in the classroom, the model we provide of respecting the culturally different child may be the most important thing we ever teach (West,1986).

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